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RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON 8426
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 3438
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN 4596
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO 2712
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TAGS: [BF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#)

SUBJECT: CHURCH LEADER SPEAKS OUT ON THE NEED FOR CAMPAIGN
FINANCE REFORM

Classified By: DCM D. Brent Hardt for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In wide-ranging remarks on October 24, Anglican Archbishop Drexel Gomez criticized the role of money in Bahamian politics, lamented corruption in government, and called for a stronger focus on character in selection of political leaders. The remarks, witnessed by Gomez special guest Prime Minister Christie, show a renewed focus on transparency issues leading up to elections that could mean bad news for the ruling Progressive Liberal Party. Scandals have become a problem for the PLP and church criticism is a sign of vulnerability in coming elections. The remarks also put a spotlight on an election process that continues to include open provision of gifts to voters and political parties in the search for influence. End Summary.

Church Remarks Target PM

12. (SBU) Archbishop Drexel Gomez, who heads up the largest religious congregation in The Bahamas, took a surprisingly sharp aim at the current PLP government in a high-profile annual opening of the Anglican Synod October 24. Gomez, having intervened personally to ensure the Prime Minister would be present, launched a stern rebuke of corruption and poor ethical standards in politics as Christie looked on from the front pew. Gomez took aim at the role of private money in politics, explicitly calling for campaign finance reform while implicitly criticizing politicians on the take after being elected. Said Gomez, influence peddlers "ought not to be permitted to purchase favors at the expense of others who cannot pay for the same" noting that the grant of such favors "is tainted with a preference not having to do with the public good."

13. (SBU) Gomez also blasted the government's handling of a recent fight between Members of Parliament in the Cabinet Room that he said symbolized the lax standards of conduct that had become the norm in Bahamian politics. With the PM squirming, Gomez called government use of the cat o' nine tails "barbaric", noted lack of economic development on Grand Bahama island and railed against the "lack of urgency" in the Ministry of Education over problems in Bahamian public schools. The PM later remarked to a visiting American businessman that he had been "invited to listen to criticism

of my government."

¶4. (C) The remarks clearly targeted Christie, whose 2002 election platform called for campaign finance reform and higher ethical standards for parliamentarians -- this in part to distance his Progressive Liberal Party from the corrupt PLP administration under former PM Lynden Pindling. In office, however, the PLP has failed to act on its reform promises. Despite holding an overwhelming majority in Parliament, the PLP has yet to introduce a single piece of legislation to regulate the financing of political campaigns or enforce ethical standards among MPs. In fact, Gomez' comments come as the PLP government responds to a series of scandals, including the MP fistfight that damaged windows and a table in the Cabinet Office, allegations of self-dealing in government contracts, and the withholding of government information from the public.

'Tis the Season for Giving

¶5. (C) Gomez' calls for campaign finance reform are timely, not only because of allegations of corruption against the PLP and its unfulfilled promises of reform, but because of approaching elections. Politicians traditionally spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to gain a parliamentary seat in a country of 300,000 persons. Much of the money is used to purchase gifts for voters, from Christmas hams to household appliances. To finance these gifts, politicians turn to outside support, with an understanding that help financing a successful campaign results in the award of government contracts. As one Cabinet Minister observed, there are no controls or limits other than the conscience of the politician. In addition, money can come from any source,

including international donors. Millions of dollars were allegedly obtained from questionable sources in the 2002 campaign. It has been widely reported that at least two current ministers received funding from recently extradited drug "kingpin" Samuel "Ninety" Knowles, and it is widely accepted that the government's extradition of Knowles will lead to withdrawal of an important source of election funding.

Comment: PLP Losing the High Ground?

¶6. (C) Corruption in politics is a serious but largely ignored problem in The Bahamas. This corruption is a product of: a lack of transparency about the government's decisionmaking and financial dealings, a lack of any campaign finance rules regarding the origin of donations, the pressure to spend heavily -- and become heavily indebted to financial supporters -- during campaign season, and a culture of secrecy in Bahamian government and politics. Gomez' comments garnered attention in part because Church support of the PLP has generally been strong and contributed to Christie's 2002 election victory. Christie has remained close to the politically influential Christian Council, but until now, the Council has been generally silent on PLP ethical scandals. Gomez' remarks represent a clear shot across the bow to the government that at least some religious leaders remember Christie's unfulfilled promises to clean up politics and want this issue to be part of the upcoming election campaign. END COMMENT.

ROOD